



## The Need for Decision

St. Matthew 7:13-14

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This morning I want to turn us back to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We're in the home stretch. The last time we were here in St. Matthew's Gospel, we looked at the Golden Rule. It's Jesus' own summary of everything he's been teaching up to this point in the sermon: "Do unto others, what you would have them do unto you." The rest of the sermon simply calls us to make a decision – to choose. And I think these last few verses are appropriate for Eastertide this year, because if you'll remember if you were here this past Saturday night or Sunday morning, our focus was on the implications of the Resurrections. It's not just enough that Jesus died so that we can each have a clean slate when it comes to sin. He forgives our sins, but in the Resurrection he gives us new life. As St. Paul said, we who have died to sin with him, also take part in his resurrection and have new life in him. He forgives our sins, but also calls us to sin no more as he shows us a better way and offers himself as our model.

And he does the same thing here in the last verses of the Sermon on the Mount. There are people who hear Jesus' Sermon and think most of it's pretty good, but they still think they can *do* the Sermon on the Mount if they just put in a little more practice, while all the time continuing on the same path they were on before. If that's you, Jesus reminds you here that following him begins with a full about-face and that you *cannot* do this unless you've first made a personal commitment to him as Lord. Some people hear the Sermon on the Mount. They think religion is generally a good thing, so what Jesus says here is good, but they also figure they ought to keep listening to the other messages that are out there. They're going to pick and choose what sounds good to them. But here in these verses Jesus warns that there are lots of false prophets out there and that the messages of false prophets cannot save – in fact we know they're false because they point away from Christ and the message and

priorities he's given us. Jesus warns us against settling for an outward profession of Christianity without making a real change of heart, and he warns us that the only true "religious" life is the one that's built on him as the only firm and adequate foundation.

Remember that at the time Jesus preached what St. Matthew records here, he was just starting his ministry. He was speaking of last things to those who at that point had no knowledge of his coming death, resurrection, and ascension. And yet those are the events on which salvation by faith is dependent. Those events were still three years away. What would happen to all these people who were interested in the message they were hearing in the meantime? Lots of them might be prone to hearing Jesus' message today, but forgetting it by the time three years had passed. Lots of people might hear it today enthusiastically, but in the time between now and Jesus' death and resurrection they might get discouraged and start looking at the message as nothing more than an impossible ideal. And so knowing that three years would pass before his Kingdom would be initiated and all of his teaching here would be fully realised, Jesus challenges the people to keep on: "Keep on. Don't fall by the wayside. If you do keep on, there will be a day when you'll see the gate clearly, and then you'll pass through it to eternal life."

That means that we need to understand these last verses as Jesus' warning to the people to keep on until his death and resurrection brought his ministry to completion. In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus said:

**Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.**

What does that mean? If you remember that Jesus was talking to people who weren't yet Christians it can only mean that there's a wide and easy way of life that leads to a wide and easy gate that leads only to destruction – and that the wide way is our natural path. Every one follows that path unless they make a conscious choice to turn and follow the narrow and hard one. The narrow path leads to the narrow gate, to Jesus Christ,

and through him those who follow the narrow path find eternal life. Jesus is saying, "Keep following the narrow path until you pass through me to eternal salvation."

In the rest of the sermon Jesus *has* been talking about the *Christian* life. The problem is that some people take that to mean that Jesus was preaching to Christians – which, again, is impossible since Jesus hadn't yet died and been raised from the dead – and if you assume these verses were written to Christians then they become a warning to keep on *working* at the Christian life so that you don't someday lose your salvation. You can't take that interpretation, because it conflicts with the doctrine of eternal security that we find throughout the rest of Scripture. In my study, this seems to be the most common misinterpretation of these verses. A lot of people stress that the Christian life is the narrow way and that only those who persevere to the end will be saved.

But Jesus' warning doesn't mean that. It can't mean that given the context. Instead, the context makes it a warning to the unbeliever who has been told the Gospel message: you must not stop short of salvation by thinking that you can just keep walking the wide and easy path you're already on. If you are not on the narrow way to Christ, you are in fact walking *away* from him and will never come finally to eternal salvation by the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. That's Jesus' warning here.

We need to understand that Jesus' warning is that salvation is by faith in him and in him alone. If we can grasp that, then there's another really important truth that we need to see at the centre of it all. We need to ask: What is the way that leads to eternal life? The answer is right here: the Lord Jesus Christ is the way. In John 10:9 he himself says, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved" (NIV). In John 14:6 he says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." When Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few," he was talking about *himself*. The way to heaven is exactly as narrow as Jesus Christ!

That's not a message the world likes to hear, especially today. One of the givens

of the Post-modern world that we live in is the philosophical proposition that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Of course saying that is nonsense, because if that statement is true, then there is at least one thing that is absolutely true! But the world's bought this idea anyway. Christianity has always butted heads with the world, but this is a new place where it's happening, because Christianity is unique in claiming that it does in fact have a claim on absolute truth. Christianity holds up Jesus Christ as the *only* way to God. Jesus' words about himself – like the words we just read from St. John's Gospel – are unqualified, and this means that if Jesus is right – and we know that he is – then there aren't any other paths to follow that will lead to life.

Let me make this clear. First, if Christ is the only way to God, it rules out all our other ideas about multiple ways to God. It's popular for a lot of people, who for whatever reason don't like churches or "organised" religion, to say that men and women can find God through nature. No. The idea that God can be found in nature is an illusion that consistently leads to idolatry, whether we're talking about primitive tribal people worshipping deities they find in earth, trees, animals, or the sky or the modern "Deists" and New Agers who see God as an impersonal force of which we're all a part. If you sit anywhere on that spectrum, you're practicing idolatry.

A few years ago I got into a conversation with a co-worker who liked to spend his weekends hiking. We got into a discussion about Christ and Christians that ended up with me inviting him to come to visit our church to see what it was all about for himself. He flat-out refused and said that the last place he wanted to spend his Sunday was in a church. "I worship God on the trail," he told me. So I asked him what god he was worshipping on the trail. He said, "The mountain, the tree, and the sea." And as poetic as that might sound, it was just evidence of his idolatry. It was pure paganism and it's nothing more than a delusion to think that that kind of attitude has anything to do with worshipping God. If you think that going hiking, or fishing, or golfing on Sunday morning is worshipping God, you're deluding yourself. If you're doing that, you're not worshipping God in nature. You're either not worshipping him at all

(which I think is usually the case) or you're worshipping nature, and nature is not God.

Now the Bible *does* say that God is revealed *in* nature, but what does it say that revelation in nature is for? Scripture tells us that it's to condemn men and women for failing to recognise God. St. Paul says in Romans 1:20 that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all men and women, "for his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." No one has ever come to the God of our Lord Jesus Christ through nature alone.

The other popular way of thinking is that we can find God through being pious or religious – that we can find God if we take up certain religious duties. That's the way of Eastern religions – fourfold or sevenfold paths that will lead to Nirvana. That's the way of the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses – climb the ladder of works and you'll find God. But lots of people who think of themselves as Christians make the *same* mistake. The fear that men and women would be led astray by ritual was one of the primary reasons why the Reformed Episcopal Church was formed. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw a massive resurgence of "ritual" in Anglicanism. We could argue about whether it was all good or bad, but the fear of many was that ritual would for many people become a substitute for faith in Jesus Christ. How many people do you know that think they're all set for heaven simply because they're members of a church, because they go to church, or because they're faithful in this or that ritual?

But you see, God has stamped a big "No" over every human effort to be religious so that he can stamp a big "Yes" over every one who abandons "religion" and turns to Jesus Christ. "Religion" is looking for a god you create in your own image. Christianity – true religion – is God's coming after you and moving to redeem you by the death of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

You can't find God through morality, whether that means trying to live up to God's standard or by trying to live up to a

standard you create yourself. We fall short of every standard. That's what the first three chapters of Romans are all about: that no one will find God in any way except through Christ. The man or the woman with the high moral standard – even the Pharisee – is right there with everyone else trying to get to God through morality. In those chapters, St. Paul describes three different kinds of people: the pagan man, the moral man, and the religious man. But he ends with a word of condemnation against all human goodness. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." There is no way that we will ever come up with on our own that will ever or can ever lead us to God.

And yet there *is* a way in the person of Jesus Christ. As we read a bit ago, he described himself as *the* way. You and I, we've all sinned. It doesn't matter if our sins are big ones or little ones or if you've sinned once in your life or a million times – even that one tiny little sin separates us from God. If you struggle with that you need to grapple with what it means that God is perfectly holy and that he's our loving Creator. You need to grapple with the fact that sin, big or small, is in its very nature rebellion against our Creator. We need to understand that our sin is a sort of cosmic treason. For us to sin is for us to deliberately turn our backs on him and do that which offends him the most. He created us for fellowship with himself, and when we sin we deliberately throw off the holiness and fellowship for which we were created and make ourselves *enemies* of God. We take up that which is the polar opposite of what defines his very character. And so because of our sin, we put ourselves out of God's presence and leave no way to get back in.

One person once told me that he had no interest in Christ. We talked about sin and holiness and all that. He told me, "Fine, then let God punish me for my sins, and then, after I've paid the penalty, he can let me into heaven." No. It doesn't work that way, because the punishment, the penalty for sin is to be separated from God. The punishment is the full fruit of the choice we make when we sin. When we sin we choose to put ourselves out of God's presence and the penalty for that is an eternity apart from him.

The only solution lies in Jesus Christ, because in Christ God provides a substitute for us. He died not for any sin he'd committed – he was perfectly sinless – but for your sin and mine. God doesn't punish the same sin twice. And so if you believe that Jesus died for you, if you acknowledge him as your substitute, if you stop putting your faith in anything that you can do to earn your way back into God's presence and put your whole faith and trust in what Jesus has already done for you, then God will take away your sin and he'll take it away for ever. If you will take that narrow path that leads to the narrow gate – to Jesus Christ himself – you will find salvation.

Don't make the mistake of counting on your moral record as a way of coming to God. It's your moral record that gets you into trouble in the first place. No matter how good you think you've been and no matter how good other people might think you are, your record will condemn you if you stand before God on your own, without Christ. You need to count on the fact that Jesus has paid the penalty for your sins, that he did what no one else could do, because only he was without sin. Accept the fact that in his death, he provided a way for sinners who will humble themselves to enter into the presence of God. As I said on Good Friday, on the cross he stretched out his arms to gather us in. When he died the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was torn in two. No one could enter the most holy place, because that's where the presence of God resided symbolically. But when Jesus died, he opened the way for sinners to enter the presence of our holy God. But the gate is only as wide as his cross.

Let me close with one more truth that comes out of this passage about the wide and narrow ways. Jesus said, "Enter by the narrow gate." The parallel passage in St. Luke's gospel puts it, "Strive to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24). It's not enough to listen to me preach about the narrow gate. It's not enough to stand on the path and admire the architecture of the gate. It's not enough to praise it and give thanks that it's here or that it's so beautiful. It's not enough to stand close to it. You have to *enter* it. You have to *pass through* it. That means that everyone who hears the Gospel

message preached has to make a personal decision to enter into Christ.

We live in a world where it's pretty common for people to think of themselves as Christians for all the wrong reasons. They think they're somehow automatically Christians because they inherited it from their parents, who may or may not be actual believers themselves. They think they're Christians because they're members of a Church – which doesn't mean much in most churches these days. They think they're Christians because they come to church on Christmas and Easter every year. But you can't make these kinds of assumptions. No one is automatically a Christian. Nobody is a Christian by default. No one is a Christian because of membership in any earthly group. Nobody is a Christian because of his or works. And you can't be neutral. Jesus teaches that you're either on the wide way or the narrow way. Nobody just "drifts" into Christianity. The true gate is narrow and the way that leads to it is a hard one. If you are to become a believer, you have to make a decision and it's not a decision that someone else can make for you.

It's always been this way. 3500 years ago Moses told the people, "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.... Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live" (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19). A generation later Joshua said to the people, "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). And after Judah had fallen, God spoke to Jeremiah saying, "To this people you shall say: 'Thus says the LORD: Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death' (Jeremiah 21:8). On the day of Pentecost St. Peter preached saying, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). God still calls on us today and he calls us to make that same decision.

Every one of us has some thinking to do now. We each need to ask, "What's the state of my heart?" As we've looked at the Sermon on the Mount, you might be one of those people who acknowledges that all this is true, but you've never made these things true for yourself personally. If that's you, Jesus is warning you that leaving things the way they are isn't good

enough. You need to come to a point in your life at which Jesus becomes *your* Saviour. A lot of people get stalled out here, because they've thought they were Christians because they were raised that way, because they're members of a church, or because they're "church people." John Stott was one of those people. He writes, "I remember how puzzled, even indignant, I was when it was first suggested to me that I needed to appropriate Christ and His salvation for myself. Thank God, I came to see that, though an acknowledgement that I need *a* Saviour was good, and a belief that Christ was *the* Saviour of the world was better, best of all was a personal acceptance of Him as *my* Saviour."

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." But he has to be the way *for you*. He said, "I am the gate." But you have to walk through it.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, in your Son Jesus Christ, you opened the gate that leads to you and to eternal life. Fill us each with your Spirit that we might be able first and foremost to see that the wide and easy path leads to destruction, and that Jesus Christ leads us to life. Grant us the humility to acknowledge our sins and to put our faith and trust in Christ, making him our Lord, that we might find the only way to eternal life. We ask this in his name. Amen.